

Backgrounder

The E-Waste Problem

Electronic waste (e-waste) is a rapidly growing problem. With advances in technology and lower prices people replace electronic products frequently – as often as every two years.

Electronic products contain lead, mercury, cadmium, brominated flame retardants, and other hazardous substances. Computer monitors, central processing units, TVs, and cell phones may be categorized as hazardous waste because of their lead and mercury content.

In the Northwest Washington counties of Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, King, Pierce and Thurston more than one million obsolete electronics will be generated in 2005 -- roughly 44 percent of that, or 463,000 units will be TVs and the rest computer parts. This is only expected to increase in the future as the pace of technological advances quickens and electronics become obsolete more quickly.

King County's 2003 Waste Reduction and Recycling Survey shows that households are storing more than 174,000 computers and 118,000 televisions while waiting for a disposal option.

Also of concern is what happens when e-waste is shipped overseas to be "recycled". The United States exports an estimated 50 to 80 percent of its electronic waste to countries like India, China and Pakistan. In these countries, workers (many of whom are children) disassemble computers by hand to reach the copper, aluminum and steel that can be sold and reused. Many wear little or no protective clothing and have minimal environmental protections. In addition to the risk to human health caused by handling toxic materials, improper disposal can lead to environmental contamination.

This year, two e-waste recycling pilot programs were conducted in the Puget Sound region as a way to seek solutions to the growing problem. The first, backed by EPA and supported by local governments, was a television recycling program through Good Guys in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. It was very successful – 4,042 TVs were collected for recycling surpassing the goal of 2,000. The results of the project, including a customer satisfaction survey, will be compiled in a report to the EPA.

The second pilot program currently underway nationwide is through Office Depot and was developed with input from King County, Snohomish County, City of Seattle, City of Tacoma, Kitsap County, and Clark County in Washington and Metro Portland in Oregon. The program goes until Labor Day and collects and recycles for free old electronics including TVs, PCs, digital cameras, handhelds and cell phones. Results will be evaluated with grant funds from the Environmental Protection Agency's Plug Into eCycling program and data will be provided to a northwest coalition working on electronic recycling solutions, retailers, manufacturers and others interested in conducting similar product stewardship programs.

Local governments and environmental organizations have also brought this issue to the state level as they seek long-term solutions. Earlier this year, the state legislature passed [House Bill 2488](#) requiring the Department of Ecology to conduct research and

develop recommendations for implementing and financing a collection, recycling, and reuse program for electronic products in Washington State. The information gathered from this pilot project will be analyzed and used to inform the study. Reports are due to the legislature in Dec. 2004 and Dec. 2005.

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